Language mixing and metalinguistic awareness of Aché children

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1. Introduction

Language contact and linguistic boundaries have long been topics of interest to linguistic anthropologists; our understanding of language itself has profited greatly from questions arising on its borders (e.g., Hill & Hill, 1986; Urciuoli, 1995; Irvine & Gal, 2000). In the context of language contact and shift and recent revitalization activism in an indigenous Aché community of Paraguay, this paper focuses on how language and linguistic difference emerge in interaction. In everyday conversation and play Aché children consciously manipulate pragmatically salient features of the languages that they encounter in the multilingual environment they grow up in. In language lessons in school they are taught how to assign signifiers to specific languages. Here I analyze the phenomenological modifications implicit in metalinguistic repairs and language teaching in order to understand how language is constituted as an object of attention available to speakers' consciousness.

2. The Aché, Their Languages, and Ideologies

The Aché were nomadic hunter-gatherers, living in the dense subtropical rainforests west of the Paraná River in what today is Eastern Paraguay. The destruction of over 90% of the forest, persecutions by Paraguayan colonists, and virgin soil epidemics forced them onto reservations in the 1960s and 70s (Münzel, 1983; Hill & Hurtado, 1996). This process implied dramatic social and cultural changes, among them rapid language shift from their heritage language, Aché, to the national language, Guaraní. Today, the dominant communicative code in the communities is a highly heterogeneous hybrid composed of structural and lexical elements from both languages (hereafter GA). As Paraguay is a bilingual country with Spanish and Guaraní as official languages, and since Guaraní has already been heavily influenced by Spanish after five centuries of language contact, GA also incorporates many elements of Spanish.

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The Aché language itself, as spoken before the recent contact with the national society, is also the result of language contact in pre-Columbian history. Most of its lexicon and phonological inventory is similar to Guaraní, but it presents grammatical features that are atypical of Guaraní and other Tupi-Guaranian languages, suggesting a contact situation of a group of speakers of some early variety of Guaraní with a group of speakers of a language or languages belonging to other stocks (Dietrich, 1990; Rößler, 2008).

The common origin of both languages and current linguistic convergence make it sometimes very hard even for native speakers to distinguish between recent borrowings from Guaraní and cognates; often the difference is a very subtle one depending on phonetic realization. Yet, the differences between the two languages have become very important today for the Aché. As in other endangered language communities (cf. Grenoble & Whaley, 1998) many Aché are concerned about the loss and revitalization of their heritage language and a language activist movement has emerged that promotes what they call *acheete*, the "real Aché," i.e., the speech community's ideological construction of original and pure Aché. This movement must be understood within a larger context where indigenous languages are mobilized to support claims of cultural continuity in relation to land rights, funding for education, or representation on a national level (Errington, 2003). Its emphasis on unmixed Aché is a side effect of the Aché communities' contact with broader national and global ideologies about language.

This concern does not obviate the covert ideologies that have been fostering mixing, hybridization, and shift for the past 40 years, as means of rationalizing and capitalizing on the regional political economy of linguistic forms. Currently, however, it is the explicitly stated goal of activists, teachers, and community leaders to maintain and revitalize Aché as it was spoken before contact with Paraguayan society, *acheete*, which is taught in the primary schools in all Aché communities. *Acheete* has also been central to the activities of missionaries and Bible translators. And it is the language that two colleagues and I have been documenting since 2008 in a language documentation project.[2]

In this paper I examine the impact that such an ideologically charged environment has on Aché children's everyday language use. Aché children's practices and learning experiences offer rich insights into the constitution of "language" and "a" language in situations where it is notoriously difficult to establish linguistic borders (cf. Gumperz & Wilson, 1971; Hill & Hill, 1986; Urciuoli, 1995). In what follows I analyze Aché children's marked uses of "pragmatically salient" (Errington, 1988) elements belonging to different languages, i.e., referentially equivalent linguistic alternants whose pragmatic difference is available to native speakers' awareness in terms of their assignability to one language or another. Since the unmarked way of communicating in the Aché communities is GA and since the linguistic belonging of constituents within GA is not pragmatically meaningful most of the time, switching between these alternants evidences the conscious manipulation of linguistic code (*sensu* Jakobson [1956] 1980) by the children.

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[2] The Aché Documentation Project (2008-2013), part of the DOBES program for language documentation, was carried out by Eva-Maria Roessler (State University of Campinas), Warren Thompson (University of Michigan), and myself under the direction of Jost Gippert and Sebastian Drude (Goethe University, Frankfurt). We documented the language practices of the elders and built an archive of the Aché language at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen.

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3. Metalinguistic repair

Data were collected during twelve months of linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork in one of the six Aché communities.[3] Example (1) is taken from a hunting trek. Children and women are sitting around fires. A few children discuss the pronunciation of the alveolar trill [r] of the Spanish word "*perrita*," which is the name of one of their dogs. Six-year-old Bupigi[4] tries to imitate the way the word sounds in Spanish but is interrupted by his elder sister, Anegi, who is sitting apart but has overheard him and corrects him using a slightly more retroflexed pronunciation of the trill. Bupigi then goes on to play around with the different pronunciations. A few minutes pass. Then Anegi tells her two-year-old baby cousin who had stood up to sit back down again:

(1) Anegi: **Eguapy**.[5]
e-guapy
IMP-sit
G G
Sit down.

Bupigi: Nda'e (.) .hh **wapy**:::: ei.
nda'e wapy he'i
NEG.COP sit says
G(A) A G
That's not right. It is: "sit down."

Anegi's brother has overheard her and now he is correcting her pronunciation, this time of the word for "sit." The word is a cognate in Aché (*wapy*) and Guaraní (*guapy*), the difference being that the Guaraní syllable-initial velar stop diphthong sequence [gu] is rendered as coarticulated labiovelar approximant [w] in Aché. Aché also does not mark the imperative through the prefix e-.

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[3] After five years of documentation work in all six Aché communities, for my current research project on language ideologies and socialization practices of Aché children I have carried out an in-depth study in one community for a total of twelve months between April 2013 and September 2014. I worked closely with two out of forty families of the community focusing on eight focal children between two and ten years of age and their wider peer group of approximately twenty to twenty-five children. I video-recorded naturally occurring interactions during play, in the primary schools, and on occasional hunting treks to a nearby forest reserve collecting a total of over 200 hours of video. A sample of recordings have been transcribed and translated in ELAN. The examples included here are all from children between six and ten years.

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] Metalinguistically highlighted constituents as well as their unmarked counterparts are in **boldface**. Each block of five lines contains: (1) original text; (2) morpheme boundaries; (3) interlinear English gloss; (4) language key; (5) free English translation. *Interlinear glosses:* COMP – completeness marker; COP – copula; DIM – diminutive; FUT – future; IMP – imperative; INT – interrogative; LOC – locative; NEG – negative; 1,2,3,SG,PL – personal pronouns, incl – inclusive, excl – exclusive. *Language key*: A – Aché; G – Guaraní; S – Spanish; B – bivalent (Aché/Guaraní); G(A), etc. – Guaraní lexical item but adapted to Aché phonology or morphology, etc.

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Bupigi performs here a metalinguistic "other-correction" (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977; Field, 1994) of his sister (marked as boldface in the transcript). By changing the phonological and morphological shape of Anegi's utterance, Bupigi identifies the trouble source in the linguistic code itself. Note, however, that his utterance is not "pure" *acheete*; the other constituents are GA, the unmarked code.

The next example must be understood in relation to my role as a language researcher who for years has been doing research on the language of the elders, i.e., *acheete*. This recording focuses on a group of children playing in the community. One of the children suggests they go to the nearby forest. Pikygi notices that I am filming them and turns to me informing me of their plan:

(2) Pikygi: Ore hota **ka'aguy**pe.
ore ho -ta ka'aguy -pe
1.PL.excl go -FUT forest -LOC
B G(A) G G B
We'll go to the forest.

Kragi: Kwewe, ha'ekuera guatata **kadji**. *((coming up from behind))*
Kwewe ha'ekuera guata -ta kadji
[pers.n] 3.PL walk -FUT forest
- G G(A) G A
Kwewe[6], they are going to the forest.

Eiragi: **Kadji**.
kadji
forest
A
Forest.

((general laughter))

Tatugi: Kwewe ore hota amo- (.) **kadji** ogape.
Kwewe ore ho -ta amo kadji oga -pe
[pers.n] 1.PL.excl go -FUT DEM forest house -LOC
- B G(A) G G A G B
Kwewe we're going eh- there (.) forest, home.

In this other-initiated repair, Kragi is substituting the Guaraní word for forest (*ka'aguy*) that Pikygi had used in the first utterance, with its Aché equivalent (*kadji*). This is taken up by the other children causing considerable amusement. Again Kragi is highlighting the code of the previous utterance as trouble source. And again, most of the other elements of his utterance are not (pure) Aché.

The third example again involves me as language researcher. A baby tapir is lying under a tree a couple of yards away and one of the children is encouraging me to film it:

[6] Kwewe is the name I have been given by the Aché.

(3) Fagi: Enoẽmi mombyry **bori**. (0.2) **Brovi**. (0.3)
e- ñohẽ -mi mombyry bori brovi
IMP- take.out -DIM far.away (tapir) (tapir)
G G G G - -
Please film the (tapir) over there.

Eñohẽ **brewi**pe
e- ñohẽ brewi -pe
IMP- take.out tapir -LOC
G G A B
Film the tapir.

Tapir is *brewi* in Aché and *borevi* in Guaraní. While I have heard both versions among the children in casual interactions, this boy here is deliberately trying to produce the Aché version for me but has trouble pronouncing it right. He starts with *bori*, realizes he got it wrong and self-repairs first to *brovi*, and then finally to the correct form, *brewi*.

These three examples and many others recorded suggest first and foremost an analysis in terms of sociolinguistic variables and recipient design. Depending on the context of the utterance or on the interlocutor, the children deliberately choose one term over the other, and monitor each other's use of pragmatically salient linguistic variables. Here implicit language ideologies, certainly informed by language activism and language documentation, constitute certain words or sounds as context presupposing indexicals (Silverstein, 1976) that have to be used in a certain situation or with certain interlocutors. While such analyses are most certainly all correct and relevant I want to take the discussion in a slightly different direction.

4. Language as phenomenological object

"Language ideologies" encompass beliefs and feelings about "a" language or specific linguistic features, but also about "language" in general. Studies by Kroskrity (1998) on "dominant language ideologies," and on "recursivity" and "erasure" by Irvine and Gal (2000) among others demonstrate that ideologies about particular linguistic forms are necessarily informed by beliefs about what language in general is, whereas understandings of language as such depend on local ideas about particular languages and linguistic practices.

In the excerpts above, an ideology that there exist distinct languages such as Aché and Guaraní informs the assignment of the lexical items *kadji* and *ka'aguy* to one or the other, despite the fact that in most everyday interactions the distinction between Aché and Guaraní is not meaningful to speakers. In those moments when the distinction becomes relevant it does so only for pragmatically salient features. I argue here that it is precisely in these moments that we can see how "language in general" emerges as a phenomenological object.

Benveniste ([1966] 1971) argued that speakers have the ability to distance themselves from their medium of communication. They recognize the code (Jakobson [1956] 1980) as a communicative device distinct from the speaker and from the content of the message. A certain metalinguistic awareness is required to successfully learn second or third languages, to translate between them; but even writing a single language implies some sort of metalinguistic awareness. And scholarship on children's development of metalinguistic

awareness has documented repair during the language-learning phase as evidence that children "are aware of language, its forms and functions, throughout the acquisition process" (Clark & Andersen, 1979, p. 11). What I endeavor to demonstrate here, however, is that the children are not only aware of preexisting languages. I propose that language itself emerges as object out of disparate linguistic resources in these interactions. In order to conceptualize this process I draw inspiration from phenomenologically oriented anthropology and research on language socialization.

Language socialization encompasses the ways in which novices are oriented "to notice and value certain salient and relevant activities, persons, artifacts, and features of the natural ecology" (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011, p. 8), i.e., how they are socialized into a particular cultural organization of attention. Language is the medium *through* which that happens at the same time as we learn *how* to use it. And one aspect of this acquisition of communicative competence (Hymes, 1966), especially in environments where there are more than one way of saying things, is, of course, noticing linguistic and register differences.

Duranti (2009) has recently pointed to an affinity between Husserl's phenomenology and language socialization. Caregivers engage in speech acts that are "explicitly aimed at directing and redirecting their … engagement with their surrounding world – a world made of people, animals, food, artifacts, things of nature, … supernatural beings" (2009, pp. 205-206) – and here I want to add "languages" to the list. Not only is language used to orient novices' attention towards objects, but language itself becomes constituted as an object-in-the-world through particular intentional acts.

When a child's speech is corrected by a caregiver or, as in the example above, by their peers, this interaction invites a "phenomenological modification" (Duranti, 2009, p. 206). The child is drawn to notice differences between correct and incorrect speech behavior. In multilingual settings such as those characteristic of the Aché communities, the boundaries between the languages themselves are discursively established, when the difference between Aché and Guaraní becomes the topic of metalinguistic repairs. This implies changes in attitude towards different linguistic forms; it causes in Husserl's terms a *Umstellung*, a reorientation (Duranti, 2009, fn. 15) of the speakers' attention. What Throop (2012) observed with regards to the ethnographic encounter holds for language, especially when informed by language endangerment and language activism: Language, once a "transparent frame" through which an individual experienced the world becomes a phenomenon that can be inspected. The "habitual, unconscious, unexamined" medium of everyday experience becomes "foregrounded as object of attention" (2012, p. 87).

5. Constituting language in the classroom

To further substantiate this argument I turn to a heritage language class in school. The teacher (T) is instructing the students in the Aché language and has written a few sentences on the blackboard that relate the story of someone going to the forest to fish, catching a fish, and then bringing the fish back to the *chupa*. The students (S)[7] have understood everything up to the word *chupa* and now the teacher tries to elicit its meaning.

[7] The utterances marked with S are from any student in the classroom, not necessarily the same person.

(4) T: “**Chupa**,” maba kuaata “**chupa**.”
chupa ma -ba kuaa -ta chupa
village who -INT know -FUT village
A G(A) A B G A
“Chupa,” who knows what “chupa” means.

S: **Chipa**?
chipa
type.of.bread
G
Chipa?

T: Da’e ai “chipa.” **Chupa**pe. Mbaiçhaguaba,
da’e avei chipa chupa -pe mba -içha -gua -ba
NEG.COP as.well type.of.bread village -LOC thing -like -LOC -INT
G(A) G G A B G G G A
It’s not “chipa.” To the “chupa.” What’s that,

S: **Tupa**,
tupa
bed
G
Bed,

T: Pira rahama? Moõpe rahata.
pira raha -ma moõ -pe raha -ta
fish take -COMP where -LOC take -FUT
B G B G B G G
He took the fish? Where will he take it.

((several utterances omitted))

S: **Palangana** ( )
palangana
pot
G
Pot ( )

T: Da’e **palangana**, **chupa**pe.
da’e palangana chupa -pe
NEG.COP pot village -LOC
G(A) G A B
“Chupape” doesn’t mean “pot.”

S: **Nokõ**.
nokõ
carrying.basket
A
Carrying basket.

T: Da'e ai da'e ai maba otro kuaata.
da'e avei da'e avei ma -ba otro kuaa -ta
NEG.COP as.well NEG.COP as.well who -INT other know -FUT
G(A) G G(A) G G(A) A S B G
Not that, not that either, who else knows?

((several utterances omitted))

T: Nande hobu peka moõpe ñande eruta.
nande ho -bu pescar moõ -pe ñande eru -ta
1PL.incl go -COND fish where -LOC 1PL.incl bring -FUT
G(A) G(A) A S(G) G B G B G
When we go fishing, where do we bring [the fish].

S: **Ule**pe,
hule -pe
plastic.bag -LOC
S(G) B
In the plastic bag,

((several utterances omitted))

S: **Nokõ**pe.
nokõ -pe
carrying.basket -LOC
A B
In the carrying basket.

T: Mbaiçha koagi hera. *((circling gesture toward roof))*
mba -içha koa -gi hera
thing -like DEM -NOM name
G G G(A) A G
What's the name of this.

S: **Oga**ba?
oga -ba
house -INT
G A
House?

T: Ñande:: (.) **tapy**pe ñande **tekoha**pe nande edjuta.
ñande tapy -pe ñande teko -ha -pe nande edju -ta
1PL.incl house -LOC 1PL.incl live -NOM -LOC 1PL.incl come -FUT
G A B G G G B G(A) A B
Our (.) house, to our home we bring it.

The original meaning of the Aché word *chupa* was "camp" or "clearing" and after settlement it has come to mean "village." It is not a word that is well known to the children, however. In trying to translate the term they come up with a number of either phonetically similar or contextually appropriate referential items, drawn from the languages that form part of their repertoire: *chipa* (traditional cheese bread, G), *tupa* (bed, G),

palangana (pot, G), *nokõ* (carrying basket, A), *hule* (plastic bag, S). Linguistically we can assign each of these items their label, Guaraní, Aché, or Spanish. Yet such assignment is neither relevant for the participants, nor for our understanding of what is going on in the classroom. For the children, engaged in the classroom activity, these referential items do not differ with regards to code, but solely with regards to their content, as candidate referents for *chupa*.

As such, all the candidate lexical items proposed by the children could be classified as GA, Guaraní-Aché, the dominant unmarked code of the community, reserving the label Aché for *chupa*. But even that is not entirely correct. In the classroom GA is not a language that is opposed to Aché, and the children are not code-switching between them. Instead, it is more appropriate to conceive of GA in *gestaltist* terms as the "ground" against which Aché or Guaraní emerge as linguistic "figures" (cf., Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012). *Chupa* indeed has come to be a proper linguistic item, i.e., an arbitrary signifier belonging to the "language" Aché. But not by virtue of being a word that was used while the Aché were still living in the forest, but rather by the ways in which it is positioned by the teacher vis-à-vis the other words in the classroom language game.

6. Conclusion

In the children's spontaneous interactions on the playground and in the forest, as well as in the heritage language lesson, the children and the teacher use GA as the default medium of communication. Whether a lexical item belongs to Aché or to Guaraní is irrelevant. As is the case with most everyday language use, they are not metalinguistically attended to as "language." And yet, language does emerge as a phenomenological object in the few moments that I have isolated. Here the phenomenological modifications invited by metalinguistic repairs and language teaching constitute the morphological differences between *borevi* and *brewi* and between *guapy* and *wapy* as metalinguistic markers by which the children's speech can be identified as one thing or the other.

In order to understand the local uses and meaningfulness of different linguistic forms in situations of language contact and endangerment, we should not take universal notions of language for granted and decide linguistic belonging in advance. It is through the close analysis of Aché children's ordinary uses of disparate linguistic resources and their occasional conscious manipulation of pragmatically salient features that we can understand how linguistic difference is produced while "language" is constituted as object distinct from participants and semantic content and available to speakers' awareness.

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